

How to develop a successful “Social Network Strategy”

By: Terrance Barkan CAE | Globalization Strategies llc

“Social Technologies” are rapidly changing how people communicate, collaborate and associate.

Does your organization have a strategy?

Globalization Strategies llc (GlobalSTRAT) is the leading independent provider of professional advisory services for the not-for-profit community on the subjects of International Strategy Development and the application of Social Technologies. Terrance Barkan CAE is the Chief Strategist and Business Architect for GlobalSTRAT, applying more than 20 years of business and international not-for-profit experience crafting solutions to complex problems.

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“Social Technologies” are rapidly changing how people communicate, collaborate and associate. Does your organization have a strategy?

They may be referred to as “Social Technologies”, “Social Media”, “Web 2.0”, “Social Networks” or any number of similar terms, but they all refer to a collection of Internet based applications that enable peer-to-peer communication and sharing of information. What is particularly new about this fast evolving trend is that it is open, powerful and pervasive.

Examples of “Social Technologies” include “Facebook”, “You Tube”, “Linkedin”, “Yahoo! Groups”, “Wikipedia”, “Myspace” and hundreds of other sites all focused on empowering individuals to:

- a) connect with friends, colleagues or strangers
- b) create, contribute and publish content,
- c) comment on, rank or embellish that content,
- d) communicate freely and creatively using multiple formats including; email, instant messaging, mobile devices, voice and video

...and all for free or next to free in terms of real costs!

What does this mean for your organization? Is it a threat, an opportunity or both? What are the implications for your members, customers, volunteers, staff, or stakeholder groups?

Social technologies are a force to be reckoned with, as the 2008 US Presidential elections have clearly demonstrated (whichever side your candidate was on). So how does your organization develop an appropriate “Social Network Strategy” that is right for you?

“Social Network Strategy” Development Framework[©]

The emphasis should not be on “social” or “technology” but on the value of the “network”. A successful “Social Network Strategy” creates value by leveraging the intelligent use of “Social Technologies”.

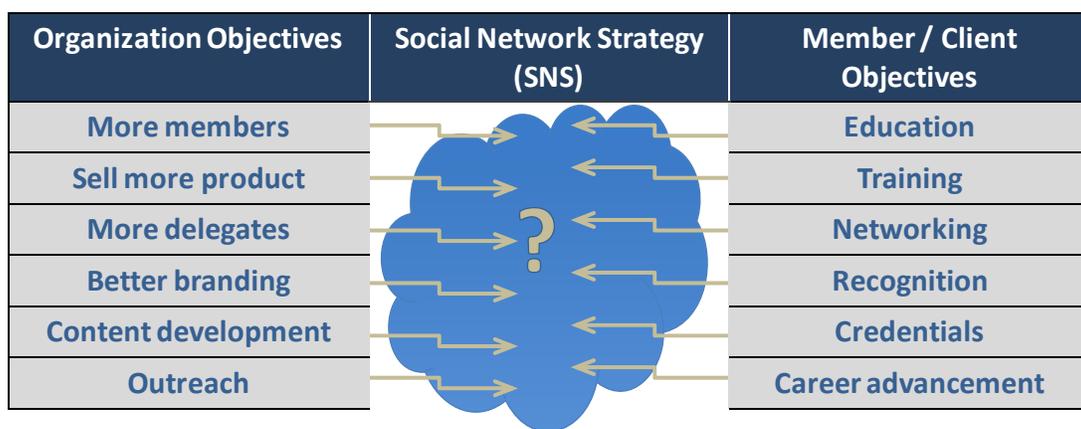
Social Network Strategy development must take place within the context of your overall organization’s mission, vision and objectives. It should serve to enhance your organization’s existing business strategy, adding new tools and capabilities.

Social Network Strategy development addresses the following perspectives:

- Your audience (current and potential)
- Your objectives
- Your message
- Your platform(s)
- Your Intellectual Property (IP)
- Your network champions
- The process, structure, plan and resource allocation to implement your strategy
- Measurement

Your organization wants to gain more members, sell more products, attract more delegates, increase brand recognition, develop more content and reach more stakeholders.

Your members want to educate themselves, improve their skills, network with colleagues, gain recognition, obtain credentials, and improve their career advancement.



A successful “Social Network Strategy” helps you satisfy both.

“Social Network Strategy” – Why is it different?

Business strategies require a well thought through process with a fact based approach. The development of a Social Network Strategy is no different.

Although Social Network Strategies can be very similar to the development of an integrated marketing and communication strategy, they have a feature that demands special attention:

Social Networks have the unique characteristic of User Generated Content

By following a proven sequence of steps, your organization can build a Social Network Strategy that will ultimately deliver a professional grade network for your members, volunteers, staff, stakeholders, customers and anyone that shares an interest in your mission and vision.

Strategy Development Steps:

1. Profile your audience (current and potential)
2. Define your objectives
3. Formulate your messages
4. Identify your platforms
5. Define your Intellectual Property (IP) approach
6. Recruit your Champions
7. Craft your processes, plan, resources and budgets
8. Measure results

Social Technologies offer a new and exciting way of communicating, collaborating and associating for human beings all over the world. This new way of communicating will have profound impacts on organizations; how they are governed, managed and how they will remain relevant in a more competitive environment.

Today, every organization needs to understand what role “Social Networks” have for their particular industry or profession and how they will advance their mission. Because each organization operates in a unique environment, no two strategies are the same. However, a common process to design a strategy can be applied with success.

The popular quote by Lewis Carroll is applicable;

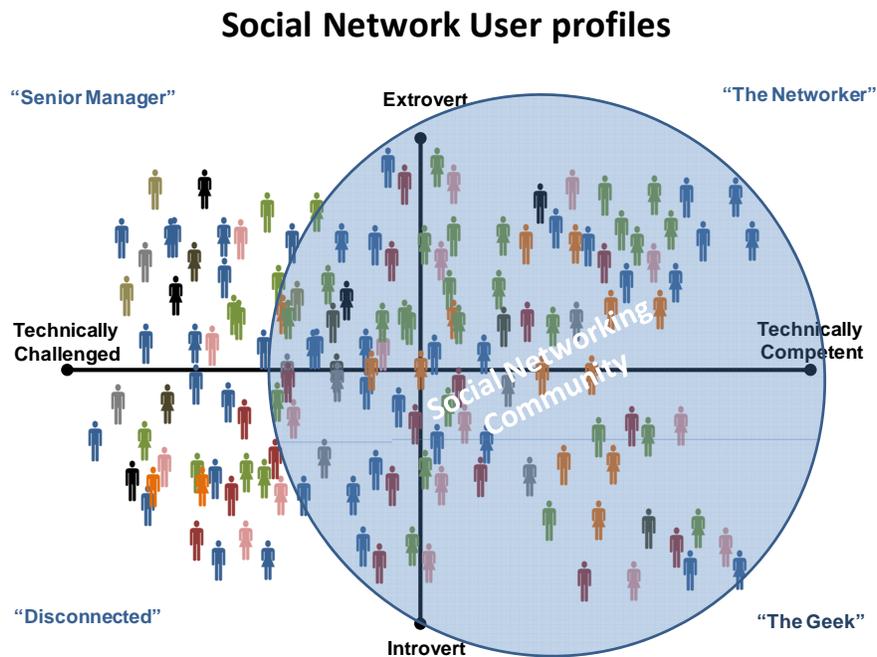
“If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.”

This White Paper defines a process to design your road map to the future.

1. Profile your audience (current and potential)

Your members and your potential members are multifaceted people that can be profiled in many different ways; by age, by levels of experience and knowledge, by seniority in their company, by geographic location, adoption of technology, income, etc.

One useful way of thinking about your target audience is to consider how they make use of technology, contrasted against whether they consider themselves to be more “extrovert” or more “introvert”.



People that are naturally extrovert and that are technologically competent would describe “**The Networker**”. This is the kind of a person that is active in the use of social technologies, is comfortable with creating and publishing content, and would have, for example, 500+ connections on “LinkedIn”.

Contrast this with people that are not yet comfortable with and therefore do not use the new social technologies or are by nature introverted and you have a group of people that are not accessible using social technologies alone.

The goal is to be able to understand how many of your members fall into which category to understand how best to reach all of your target audience in a way that will be effective. One of the positive aspects of Social Technologies is that it allows more people to engage, including those that are less likely to network and communicate in person.

There are many ways to profile your target group, measure their use of technology and their level of engagement in your association. What is important is to gain an insight into your target group that helps to inform and guide your strategy.

2. Define your objectives

What do you expect from a Social Network Strategy? What is the result that you want to drive by using social technologies? What will result from enabling your members to communicate directly with each other? How do these objectives relate to your mission and vision?

Most associations have a number of “soft” objectives that are difficult to quantify and measure. These can include a sense of community or member affinity, the perception of your brand, or the degree of influence and reputation your organization has within your profession and industry.

“Hard” objectives are those that are easy to quantify and measure. These include; how many members you have, how many participants attend an event, gross revenues or percentage of surplus over revenue.



Although most associations strive to achieve both, “soft” and “hard” objectives, few are able to clearly define the relationship between these sometimes opposing, sometimes complementary objectives.

It is important early on to clearly understand what it is you are trying to achieve and how you will measure your progress towards those objectives before you craft the content of your strategy.

For example: If your organization is primarily focused on supporting the dissemination of information and best practices but is not trying to derive extra income from such an outreach effort, your strategic approach should reflect this intent.

If on the other hand your organization must raise new revenues to support current and future development, your strategic plan will have to deliver this result.

The good news is that an appropriate Social Network Strategy often enables you to do both.

3. Formulate your messages

What result do you want your messaging and communication to produce? Do you want to inform? Motivate? Call to Action? Educate? Guide? Connect? Position? How does a Social Network Strategy fit into your integrated marketing and communications activities?

Traditional communication channels are uni-directional. They either allow the organization to broadcast a message outward or they allow an organization to collect input, but they do not allow large scale bi-lateral communication.

The new communication channels that “Social Technologies” provide allow mass communication between all members of a group directly, without organizational control or barriers.

Your Message The Medium		Your Communication Objectives			
		→	←	↔	↕
What is your message? medium?		→	←	↔	↕
Traditional	Telephone	X			
	Fax	X			
	Direct Mail	X			
	Face-to-Face			X	X
	Email	X	X	X	
	Website (1.0)	X			
New	Website (2.0)	X	X	X	X
	Blogs	X	X	X	X
	Social Networks (Public Private)	X	X	X	X
	WIKI's		X	X	X

- Your organization communicates to your Member | Customer
- ← Your Member | Customer communicates to your organization
- ↔ Conversation between your organization and your Member | Customer
- ↕ Conversation between your Members | Customers and each other!

This multi-dimensional, peer-to-peer communication aspect represents the most important dynamic of the new “Social Technologies”. It also generates the most concern for organizations, fearing a loss of control over their brand, content and access to information.

Fortunately, the ability to facilitate member-to-member free communication is one of the most powerful opportunities for associations to drive significant growth and to tap new sources of revenue while improving member satisfaction and engagement.

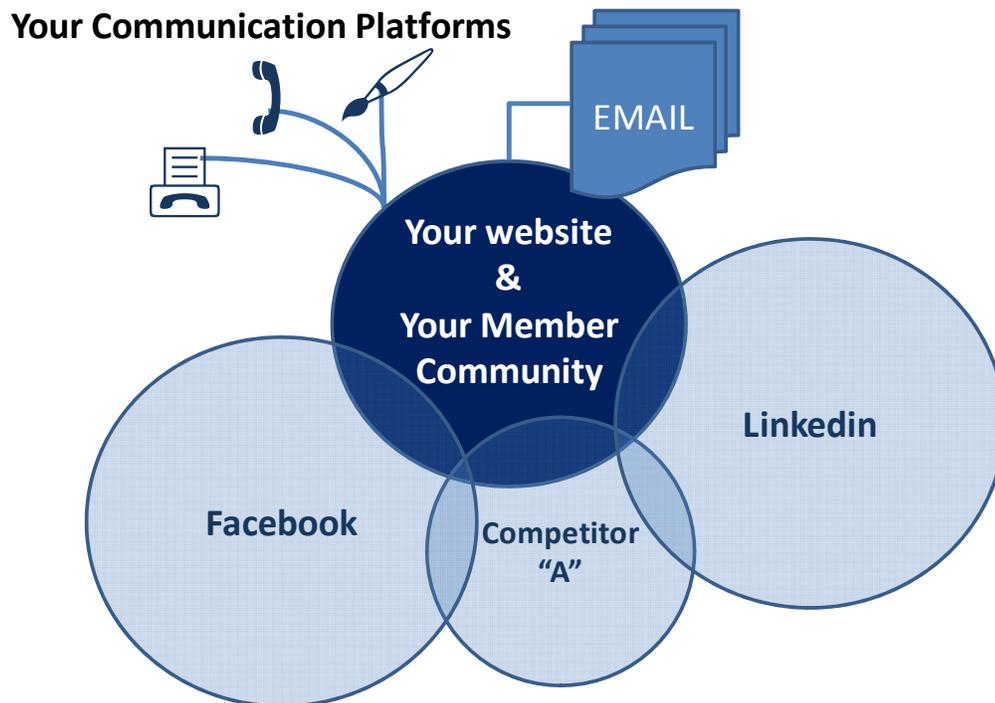
4. Your platforms

Do we have to build our own Social Networking system, integrate a proven social networking application, or use an available 3rd party public platform (ex. LinkedIn, FaceBook, etc.)? How do we use multiple platforms to best effect?

What do we do with our legacy systems? Which IT partners offer the best choice for these new technologies? What about our other existing communication channels?

Should we actually consider how to collaborate with competing platforms? How do I identify a competing versus a complementary platform?

There seem to be more questions than answers when it comes to choices about technology platforms and solutions. And it isn't getting any easier with the massive proliferation of new entrants, new solutions and the temptation to do something, anything, to avoid being left behind.



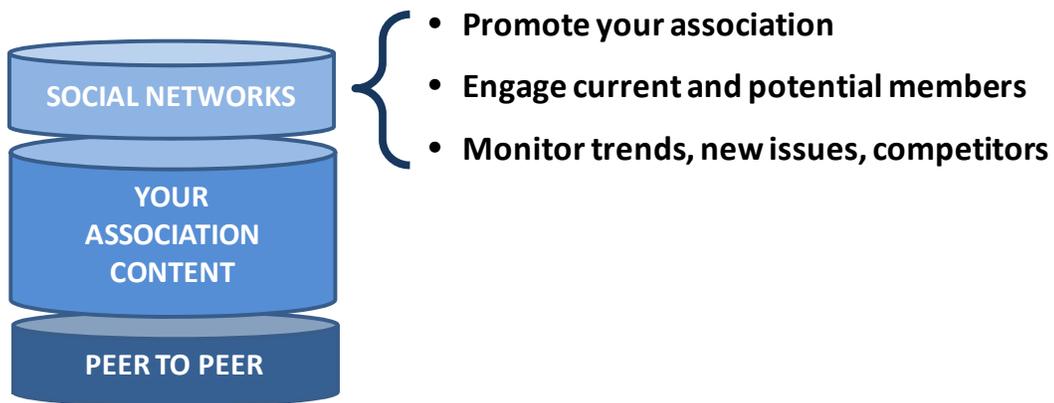
The selection of an appropriate technology platform will become far easier when you have gone through the steps of profiling your target audience, defining your objectives, and crafting a business plan that is focused on outcomes, prior to implementing a social network.

In most cases, you will want to use a combination of private, proprietary members' only areas together with existing, publicly accessed professional platforms where large numbers of your future members are connected right now. The key is in knowing how to use which platform for which purpose and to manage your organization's presence on each.

Identify your platforms cont'd

Publicly open social networks, like “LinkedIn”, and other communities of interest, can be used to raise awareness about your organization and to attract potential members. This requires thoughtful engagement and participation in established communities of interest relevant to your organization, even when they appear to be directly competing. You need to be present wherever your members and prospects are meeting and communicating.

Social Networks



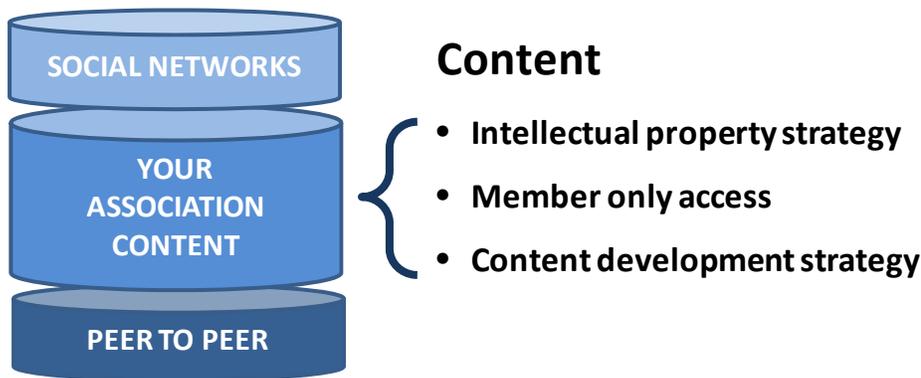
You will want to scan the environment regularly to identify already existing communities where your members or potential members might be present. This includes looking at Internet websites of your sponsors, stakeholders, competitors, key members and any other source where a community of interest that appeals to your membership base might emerge.

5. Your Intellectual Property (IP)

Two of the most sensitive and critical issues for associations involves the management of intellectual property. Firstly, how much content and intellectual property should an association expose and make available publicly, versus what must be retained as “member only” material? Give away too much, and you may remove any compelling reason for someone to pay member dues. Expose too little, and you are vulnerable to a competitor grabbing your audience by providing greater access to useful content on a rival platform.

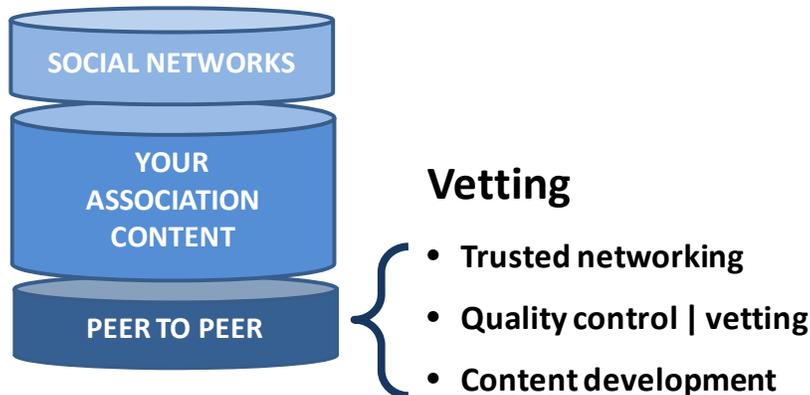
The second, highly critical issue, involves the ownership of community or user generated content. Although it is one of the most powerful and valuable features of social networking, user generated content created through a peer review process raises potential legal liabilities, especially if there is risk that your members are potentially using content that ultimately belongs to their employers.

Your organization will need to develop clear guidelines on the ownership and rights to any material created within your community site.



At the same time you will want to develop an agreed strategy on how much and what type of content you expect your social network to develop to define clear “rules of engagement” for volunteer committees and task forces responsible for content development.

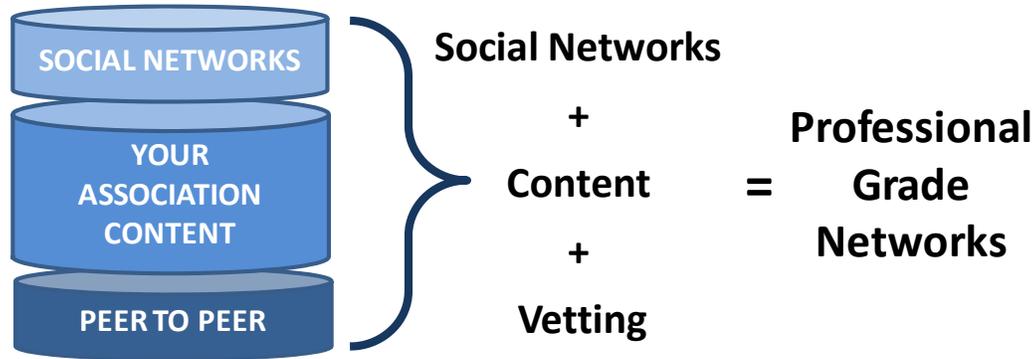
Although the new Internet based “free” information environment has made tremendous amounts of valuable information publicly available, people still search for quality, trusted information and products. Associations remain a highly trusted, credible source of information and services due to a.) their non-profit orientation, b.) a peer review and vetting process, c.) their representation of multiple stakeholder views and d.) a transparent governance structure.



One of the greatest advantages that associations have over open, public social networks is by providing a “Trusted Networking” environment, where members have a high degree of certainty they are communicating with a qualified community of peers.

This “vetting” process has been traditionally been used by associations in the development of standards, best practices, credentials and virtually all meaningful content that associations provide, from publications to training courses to events and conference presentations.

Professional Grade social Networks



It is the combination of how you use and manage...

- public social networks,
- your association content and intellectual property (IP)
- your internal, peer to peer community

...that creates what can best be described as a “Professional Grade Network”, providing maximum value for your organization, your members and your stakeholders.

6. Recruit your Network Champions!

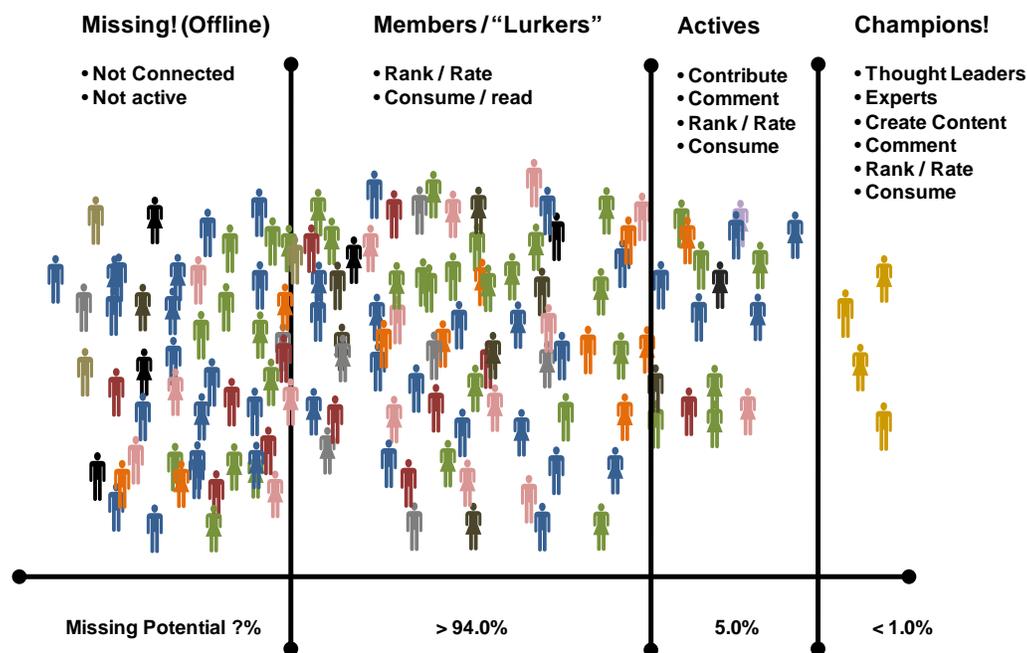
Social Networks only succeed when you have several important ingredients:

- Critical mass
- Peer groups (defined by common interests)
- Elegant technology* (i.e. it is very easy for members to join and use)
- Openness and inclusiveness
- Thought leaders and champions (fanatics!)

Although one of the defining characteristics of Social Networks is User Generated Content, the vast majority of network participants are consumers, not creators of content.

One of the most common reasons so many new networks ultimately fail is because a.) they do not develop critical mass and b.) they do not provide a consistent flow of fresh, quality content to keep the network participants engaged.

Social Network User profiles



Successful networks need Champions!

Whether it is a group of volunteers, staff with subject matter expertise or contracted content providers, your social network needs a small group of Champions to drive the discussion and contribute high quality content to bring the network to life.

It is much easier to engage additional network participants as active users if you have fresh, quality content being provided by experienced and knowledgeable experts. Your network Champions, together with active members, create the critical value add for your network.

7. Craft your processes, plan, resources and budgets

The inclusion of a Social Network Strategy in your organization will have implications for your governance structure and business plan, affecting how you allocate human and financial resources. These are potentially very positive changes as your organization adjusts to become more nimble, open, responsive and innovative.

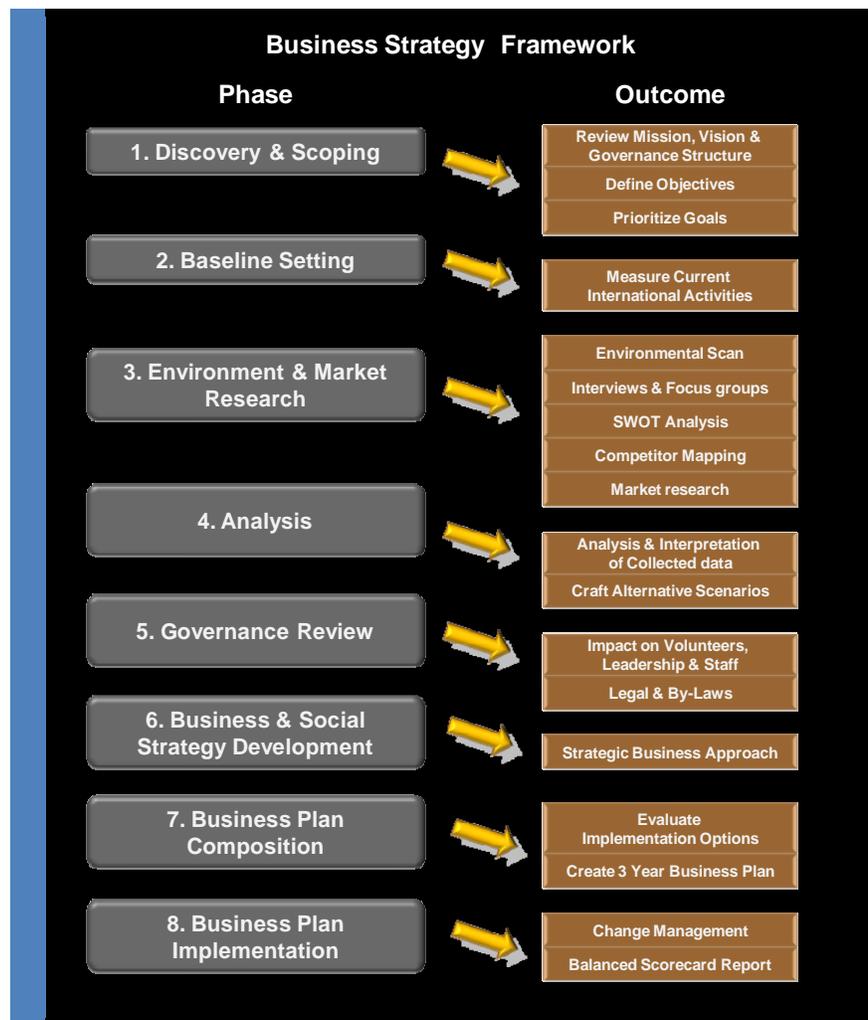
Because the changes are ultimately profound, it is suggested that you start small and be ready to grow.

Anticipate and allow for adjustments.

What if your initial results are up by 100%? What if they just meet expectations? How to adjust if they are off by -50% ?

Operational plans need to anticipate the impact on your organization and departments:

- Marketing
- Finance
- IT
- Communications
- Management
- Legal
- Membership Services
- Governance
- Intellectual Property



Because your Social Network Strategy is potentially one of the most important initiatives your organization will undertake, it requires support at the highest possible level, from both Board and Staff to succeed.

A “Social Network” strategy requires internal accountability with coordination across multiple departments. In this environment of cross department operations, you may want to consider using a new staff position i.e. “Director of Professional Network Management”?

Prepare a comprehensive budget that reflects the total investment in your social technology strategy and to make sure sufficient resources are applied to make your strategy a success.

Budget to include:

- **Hosting platform and application**
- **Design**
(look, feel and user interfaces)
- **Programming**
(integration with your AMS)
- **Content**
- **Project management**
- **Promotion and Marketing**
- **“Champion” care**
(recognition & support)

The careful selection of your IT solution and service partner is critical. Your systems, processes and interface need to be as easy to use as is possible. (Making technology flawlessly easy is hard work!) Your technology decisions will include – which tools to use for which purpose? (Wiki, Blog, Enhanced Listservers, Collaboration and file sharing, etc...)

During your implementation, be willing to tolerate negative feedback – it is an opportunity to improve and demonstrate your ability to listen and meet the needs of your members. This is an example of “Social Networking” in action!

8. Measurements

You cannot manage what you do not measure. Fortunately, Internet-based platforms provide a wealth of information and metrics in real time allowing you to obtain almost immediate feedback and to make adjustments early.

When considering the success of a Social Network Strategy, it is not just the number of page views or how many people have accessed the network but how engaged they are?

The use of an “Engagement Index” that measures the breadth and the depth of your user’s experience with your organization is an important management tool. You will want to see that your members are not just passively consuming content but using your content, adding to it, referring it to friends and colleagues, giving feedback to other users, communicating – in other words – engaged.

Sample Metrics

Metric	Baseline	Start Date	Frequency	End Date	Goal	+/- % Achieved
# Members	3,450	Jan 09	Monthly	June 09	4,000	-
# Logins	2,000	Jan 09	Daily	June 09	3,200	-
# Page Views	30,000	Jan 09	Daily	June 09	60,000	-
# New Content	250	Jan 09	Weekly	June 09	350	-
# Page Rankings	2,300	Jan 09	Monthly	June 09	2,800	-
# Blog Entries	375	Jan 09	Weekly	June 09	500	-
# Click-through	1,340	Jan 09	Daily	June 09	2,500	-

How are you going to measure these objectives? What can you measure than has meaning? This is where your choice of technology solutions becomes important. Your technology solution will ideally allow you to maintain a “dashboard” view of all of your members’ activities.

In addition to measuring the activity on your network, you will also want to keep your business and Social Network Strategy up to date by maintaining regular updates of:

- Member Profiles
- Prospect Profiles
- Competitor and Ally Network Profiles
- Alternative Platform Profiles

In the Internet age, strategy review and adjustment is not an annual exercise! It is essential to stay up to date and adjust your strategic actions on a regular and frequent basis.

Conclusion

“Social Technologies” enable organizations to provide dynamic new ways for members and clients to communicate, collaborate and associate more freely and richly. The barriers to mass communication and collaboration have fallen dramatically and with them, so have the barriers to entry for new competitors to established communities of interest (i.e. trade and professional associations).

These changes also provide brilliant opportunities to master and apply these new tools; refreshing an organization’s intellectual content, increasing the level of member engagement, extending the reach and impact of programs, and positioning the organization for future growth and success.

Does your organization have a strategy for this new environment?

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